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Silent Movies · Sara Vogan

MOST NIGHTS the bar closes quietly, Amos and Randa shooting a dice flop of horses for the last drinks, Birdheart cleaning up aimlessly before he can go to bed in his room in the back, and the jukebox dying a natural death from lack of quarters. Sullivan turns off the outside lights and unplugs the pinball machine. He leaves the glasses unwashed until morning because they remind him of the people who spent the evening here. Randa leaves a smear of lipstick on her glasses, Amos bends his stir straws, and if Rita stays after her shift there will be lime rinds floating in the melted ice of her drinks. Sullivan looks upon the hours people spend in Shelly's Leg as a personal compliment to Shelly and the bar she created, a home for the cowboys and schoolteachers, the sign painters and hairdressers, the loggers and autobody men who drink here daily.

With his back to the mirrors Sullivan sits behind the bar, sipping Chivas and staring into the silence. He has two hours, from two a.m. to four, and then the sparrows start singing in the trees along the alley. He likes to go to bed before sunrise. He believes it gives form to his days.

Of course, it wasn't always like this. There were the years Sullivan spent in the Navy and the years in the Seattle shipyards doing odd jobs. There were the years, or seasons really, when Sullivan worked for his father on the ranch below Hamilton. But when Sullivan sits in the dark of the bar he remembers only the years with Shelly. He can no longer imagine his future and believes these nights will go on like this until he dies. He sees himself growing older, sipping Chivas and staring at Shelly's picture above the jukebox, thinking back over the twenty years of their affair. They talk. Sometimes he thinks she winks at him. If this seems not quite sane to Sullivan when he is sober, it becomes fine when he is drunk.

In 1956 they used to meet on the beach at Dry Lagoon and once Shelly saw a godwit. "Isn't that a wonderful name?" she said. "Marbled Godwit. It's a type of curlew." They walked closer and watched the big sandpiper startle, run a few steps then rise on its long cinnamon wings to fly over the marsh and behind a covering of scrub willow.

"All the things I ever wanted to see are gone." She let the water foam over her toes as a wave died at her feet.

"Gone?" Sullivan asked. "Gone," he said again and his voice implied he did not believe her.

"I want to see Paris in the twenties. Flocks of passenger pigeons. The game preserves of Africa before the War."

Sullivan sat on a rock and pulled her onto his lap. His hands stroked her bare legs. "I'm glad your wants are simple. Most women want complicated stuff. Money. Houses. Rich husbands."

"That I got," Shelly said.

"That," Sullivan said, "is why you can afford to want to see Paris in the twenties."

Shelly circled her arms around his neck. She touched her forehead to his and her hair made a coppery tent around their faces letting the sunlight shine through. "I think we should take a trip," she said.

"To Paris in a time machine?"

"Let's go to Texas and see the last Whooping Cranes. Go to Alaska and look for curlew."

Gently, Sullivan removed her from his lap, sliding her onto his place on the rock before walking a few paces up the beach. He could feel her eyes upon his back as he paced. He searched the beach for a present, a sand dollar, a bird's egg, some small delicate thing to give Shelly before he answered. As he walked he saw nothing but sand, handfuls of it that would slip between his fingers if he tried to give it to her. He turned, his hands empty. "How do you plan to do that?"

"Same way we do this."

"Get a divorce," Sullivan said. "We can go anywhere then."

Shelly stood and walked over to him, looping her arms around his neck and nestling her body close to his. "Someday," she said, "we will meet like this and that word will never come up. You know that? We'll just forget to talk about whether I'll get a divorce."

"Not until you do it."

Shelly laughed. Sullivan thinks of her laugh as a musical instrument, the sounds as varied as an orchestra with the mystery and passion of fine music. "Never," Shelly said. "We'll get old. We'll struggle through the sand to meet on deserted beaches, clutching at our canes. Then we'll rub each other with mentholatum in motel rooms after geriatric sex."

Sullivan unbuttoned her blouse and cupped his palms to catch the rise of her nipples in the centers of his hands. He looked at her eyes, the long lashes and clear whites that ringed the steady blue of her stare. Looking at her eyes, his hands upon her breasts, and knowing that she was looking back at him, into him, Sullivan wanted to speak. He wanted to make a demand. But he knew that between them there was no space for words.

In these years since Shelly's death Sullivan has prided himself on the truth of his memories. He is glad he is not an imaginative man, that his memories are as clear and true as the moments were in time. He remembers colors and smells, whispers of sound fill his mind as he sits behind her bar and stares at her picture above the jukebox until the sparrows start to sing. It is a good portrait and was taken just a year before she died. But Sullivan has regrets about that picture. He regrets the bullet hole in her throat, the star pattern fanning out across the glass over her face when he fired that shot. He regrets his anger at her death and wants only to remember the good years, twenty good years in his life. He remembers the beauty of her body, even after she lost her leg, and the color of her hair. He regrets not cutting it and thinks of it growing in her grave. He wonders if the copper color has lasted, if it would keep the smell of her body.

Sometimes he wonders what will happen to her bar if he should die. Once he talked it over with his father, Old Ernie. "What if," Sullivan had said, "what if some drunked up Indian down off the Res. comes in here and blows my guts across the back bar for the money in the cash box? What then, huh?" Or what if, Sullivan thinks to himself, he dies a natural death, dies with a pain in his heart and a ringing in his ears. Old Ernie laughed at him and said not to worry; Old Ernie could take over if anything happened to his son. At almost eighty, Ernie believes he will live forever, plagued with nothing more serious than gout or rheumatism, depending on the season.

"That woman turned you all around," Ernie would say. "Made you afraid of the wrong things. You got to fear something else, something you can fasten your mind to. For me it's fishes," Ernie said. "Big ocean type fishes. I can deal with fearing fishes. I can't deal with fearing death."

When the shifts are slow Sullivan will talk about it over order sheets for potato chips and cases of booze. Indian Rita is the most optimistic about death. Rita believes in fires; says she dreams about them all the time. Fires and eyes, strong Gros Ventre symbols reserved for the men of her tribe. Some night when they are all drunked up and having fun, Shelly's Leg will just explode with fire. It will take all of them: Sullivan, Old Ernie, Birdheart, Amos and Randa, all the people who drink together. There will be nothing to worry about after that.

But Birdheart, who has seen more death first-hand than a mortician can imagine, laughed at Sullivan. "Give yourself ulcers thinking stuff like that. Shelly wouldn't care for that a bit." Sullivan is not convinced. Although Birdheart has lived in the little room off the bar for six years, ever since he finished it the way Shelly wanted it done, Sullivan knows very little about him. He doesn't know why he is called Birdheart or where he is from. He would like to see a letter addressed to Birdheart/Shelly's Leg. What would be in the letter, Sullivan can not imagine.

They danced, holding each other close and drifting in time to sad country tunes. "I can only dance with you," Shelly would whisper in his ear. "Paul and I can't dance. Our bodies don't fit together." She pushed herself into him, warm and smelling of sweet apples. "See. Your body is built for me. My head here," and she nuzzled into his shoulder, "my arms here," and she stroked the back of his neck. "And so forth," she said pushing her pelvis against him.

"Bitch," Sullivan said. "Offer a man love with your body and take it away with your mouth." He kissed her deeply, long, his teeth hard against her lips. Her mouth was stale with the taste of vodka.

She laughed and pinched his ear. "Your perfect woman would be divorced and mute."

"Just divorced."

She laughed again, the laugh Sullivan still hears in his sleep and sometimes when he is drunk behind her bar. "You're in the wrong line of business, Sullivan," she said. "You should have been a con man. Or a used car salesman."

You always go for the hard bargains.”

“Nope,” Sullivan said. “Those types are willing to compromise. I’m too single-minded for that.”

“You’ve been compromised for years.”

The band stopped playing but they continued to stand on the dance floor, their arms draped over each other’s shoulders as couples moved past them back to tables for drinks and cigarettes. Sullivan began dancing again, although the band was leaving the stage for their break. The tune in his mind was ‘Room Full of Roses’ and he waltzed Shelly around the empty dance floor, not even humming or singing to her, just letting the music flow over his mind and his hands wander over her body.

“I’ve driven you crazy,” she whispered. “We’re the only ones out here.”

“Always,” Sullivan said. “You and me. The only ones out here.”

“With you,” Shelly said, “it’s like living on an island. Water all around us.”

Sullivan sniffs and shuts his eyes tight against his tears. He knows the order of his memories and fights to keep the next memory of their dancing away from his mind. He wants to forget the night they danced in this bar, not those evenings years ago in Seattle. They were drunk and laughing that night. He doesn’t want to remember how he held Shelly tightly, holding her up as her foot dragged along the floor. “I can’t live without dancing,” she told him when she bought this bar. “If I can’t dance, I want to be where others can.”

Sullivan pours himself another shot of Chivas and sets the bottle back in the bar well where the ice is melting slowly. He wants to forget how he finally picked Shelly up and two-stepped across the floor with her in his arms. “This isn’t dancing,” Shelly laughed. “It’s flying. Do a spin.” Sullivan twirled round and round on the dance floor, holding Shelly tightly in his arms, her laughter in his ears. His circles grew tighter and tighter until he made himself dizzy and fell, Shelly sprawled in a heap on top of him.

Sullivan shakes his head and looks around the bar again. He should drain that trough; Rita hates to come to work in the morning and find the bar well full of water. It is part of their system. If Sullivan doesn’t drain the well, Rita will not dust the liquor bottles. If Sullivan doesn’t do the last rack of glasses, Rita will not stock the cooler. But thinking back on it, Sullivan remembers he drained the well last night. He looks back along the mirrored shelves, checking the bottles that are rarely used. He runs a finger along the De Kuyper Almond Brandy; it is dusty and almost full. Probably the only reason that bottle was ever opened was the night Alice asked for a liquor milkshake and Birdheart took a shot from each bottle on the top row where all the weird stuff sits. Lime Vodka, Almond Brandy, Wild Cherry Vodka, Cream de Cacao, Amaretto, and a shot of Kaluaha. Birdheart tossed it in the blender and handed it to Alice. She loved it and had two more before she ran to the bathroom and threw up.

Sullivan is glad to see the dust on the Almond Brandy bottle. It means he does not have to drain the bar trough. It means he won’t drain the trough, night

after night, until Rita dusts up this bar. He won't do glasses. In the alley the sparrows begin to sing. As Sullivan mounts the stairs to his apartment above the bar he believes this is the only rhythm of his life.

Shelly was pouring pancake batter onto the grill when Paul knocked at the door. Sullivan knew it was Paul, had always had some feeling they would meet this way. Looking out the window at Paul's new 1959 green Mercedes parked behind his truck, Sullivan debated whether to put his pants on. Screw it, he thought as he went toward the door.

"This is it," he told Shelly as she flipped a pancake.

"Who's at the door?"

"This is the moment we've been waiting for." He looked into her face for a clue to her feelings. Sullivan used to fantasize about this moment, the inevitable moment when Paul would find out about them. He wondered if she would laugh or cry, become angry. Sullivan imagined if he saw Shelly and Paul at a party or in a bar that she would ignore him at first. He imagined she would watch him, waiting for him to make the first move. But Sullivan knew he wouldn't make the first move and sooner or later Shelly would figure some way the three of them could be introduced. She would never let an opportunity like that pass.

Shelly patted at her hair, pulled the tie on her brown kimona. "Aren't you going to get dressed?"

"No."

She touched his arm as he moved past her toward the door. "Do him that favor."

Paul wore a business suit, dark gray with a pale blue shirt and no tie. Merely glancing at Sullivan's body, naked except for his jockey shorts, Paul said: "It's an emergency. Is Shelly dressed?"

Shelly stood behind Sullivan, her body silky in the kimona, her arms around his waist. "Have you all met? Want some breakfast, Paul?"

"Your mother had another stroke. I'll wait for you in the car." Paul walked back across the yard to his new Mercedes.

He has empty eyes, Sullivan thought.

Haloed of black smoke rose from the charred pancakes. "So much for breakfast," Shelly said as she tossed the mess into the garbage and went into the bedroom for her clothes.

Sullivan followed her. "How does he know where I live? That you're here?" He was frowning as he settled himself on the bed to watch Shelly dress.

"He knows everything. We've never had any secrets."

"All along?"

"He found out sometime during the first year." She stepped into her panties. "I remember," she said as she reached for her bra lying on a chair. "It was when we took that trip to San Francisco. The first time." Her arms looked like bird wings as she hooked it behind her.

"That long," Sullivan said.

"I think he used a detective. It was our only fight."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"What good would it have done?" She slipped her sweater over her head. "It wouldn't have made any difference."

Sullivan handed her the skirt and he can still remember it, the navy blue and white herringbone pattern of the wool. "It makes a difference," he said. "No secrets from Paul but secrets from me."

"You must have known he knew. All this time? Come on. Don't be dumb."

Embarrassed at his own nakedness as he watched Shelly dress, Sullivan thought the idea through again. Of course Paul must have known. They hadn't been exactly subtle about things. But what bothered Sullivan most was the knowledge that their affair wasn't secret. Sullivan had treasured that notion through all the years. He could think of Shelly in her bed at home with Paul, but Paul could not think of him. It was painful to let it go, to acknowledge Paul as a person who allowed his wife to have a seven year affair.

"Screw it," Sullivan said as he watched Shelly brush her hair.

"Stay close," Shelly said. "This is her second attack. I never thought she'd come through the first one."

"He's awfully damn patient," Sullivan said.

"I'll call you as soon as I know."

"I'm going to Portland."

She turned from the mirror to face him. "You didn't tell me you were going to Portland. You can't. What if she dies?"

With his back to her, Sullivan took a shirt from his closet. "I just decided."

"Don't," Shelly said. "I need you."

"You don't. And if you do, I won't be here."

Sullivan remembers now, sitting behind Shelly's bar and sipping his Chivas, his body remembers the two of them standing in his bedroom in Seattle. Shelly all dressed but her stockings and shoes, her hair mostly combed and shining, and in this memory Shelly is caught as a still photograph, the brush raised and reflected in the mirror. Sullivan stood in his jockey shorts and shirt, unbuttoned. She had time only to drop the brush before Sullivan had her on the bed, her skirt bunched up around her waist, the silk of her panties curling around her right ankle.

Sullivan feels the warmth of his own hand against his fly, the hard throbbing that beats like a pulse through his palm. He remembers the feel of her wool skirt on his stomach as he made love to her, her husband waiting in the green Mercedes, her mother dying of a stroke. He pushed into her roughly and made love to her as if it were rape. He can still feel her fingernails in his hair.

She called it selfish screwing. "You didn't wait for me," she said years later. But Sullivan could never bring himself to explain although he can remember as clearly as the moment he first thought of it. He was leaving Shelly and that moment on his bed in Seattle was his goodbye present. He wanted her to remember it as the end of their affair. Pushing into her with all his strength, Sullivan was tempted to leave bruises on her body, liver-colored spots to remind

Paul he had been there. He grabbed her hair with his teeth, breathing in the smell of shampoo mingled with cigarette smoke. Shelly scratched his skin, bit his cheek. Her heels came down on his back, kicking.

When he finished with her he rolled off quickly. He paced the room, his head so light he felt wind in his ears. He went into the bathroom and closed the door, hoping she would be gone when he came out. He would leave Seattle, maybe go back to his father's ranch in Montana because Portland was too close, too tempting. Holding his head under the tap, Sullivan felt the water sliding across his open eyes, pulling at his eyelashes. Water ran into his nose, beat through his ears like the beginnings of thunder.

Shelly turned off the tap. "This is a hell of a note to end on," she said. "If you go, I'll find you." She left the bathroom and Sullivan listened as she let herself out of the house. He waited for the sound of the door of the green Mercedes and imagined he might hear Paul turn the key in the ignition and drive the car away.

Rubbing his head dry with a towel, Sullivan walked into the livingroom and looked out the window. The green Mercedes was gone. He truly believed at that moment he had left Shelly and felt like he wanted to laugh but knew the sound would ring hollow in the room. He wished he were in some bar and could lean over to a drunk and share this. You know, he would say and perhaps buy the man a drink, you know how long it takes to end an affair? An affair lasts as long as a circle. Once the circle is closed the affair is over. Meeting Paul had closed the circle. The circle became a triangle. The secret had been shared, or stolen. But either way, Sullivan believed he would never see Shelly again.

This morning in Montana, behind Shelly's bar, Sullivan hears the sparrows in the trees along the alley. It is still dark, the blue-black before sunrise that is the only color Sullivan ever wanted to paint. It has a hold on his imagination like the depths of the ocean have on sailors. Sullivan believes he can feel the earth turning when the sky is dark before dawn. If he does not go to bed during this darkest time of night, if he stays up to watch the sunrise dilute the blackness of night, a new day will begin filled with the endless Montana sunshine and the transparent blue of the skies. Sullivan feels he will be awake forever, never sleeping, never dreaming. But tonight before he goes to bed he must drain the bar trough, wash the last rack of glasses. Rita has cleaned up the bar, washing each liquor bottle with a rag, straightening the rows and making sure the pourcaps fit tightly. She washed the counter under the bar and dusted off the board games and decks of cards that are seldom used now. Sullivan washes the last glasses quickly, afraid of being caught by the sunrise.

Summer nights haunt Sullivan the most. Short summer nights and long bright days making the nights more precious. He is careful of his memories and worries about his dreams. Even now, three years later, remembering the leathery stump of her right leg will make his hands sting, always did, those nights she wanted it rubbed. Sullivan would rub the stump, not sure what she

was feeling, gently as if afraid to touch the end of the bone. Then to restore feeling to his own body he would place his hand in the curve at the top of her thigh, his other hand on her breast and feel the softness of her body that was so healing.

His dreams are different now but he does not trust they will stay this way. He no longer dreams of Paul's motorcycle, no longer sees it shining in the sun, the wind moving around it as the spokes of the wheels turn so fast they become liquid silver. He has stopped hearing the whir of the axle grinding through the flesh and upper thigh bone of Shelly's leg. Those nights when he awoke to his own screaming are behind him now. Shelly cannot calm him by kissing his forehead and stroking his hair. "It was nothing like that," she used to say. "I don't remember any pain."

Sullivan believes the only times he ever lied to Shelly were when he made up the stories about where he went and what he did after he left Seattle. Of course, at first he didn't lie. In her hospital room Sullivan hadn't the heart to lie. He told her he had been waiting for that envelope, or perhaps it would have been a phone call. He said he believed she would find him, just as she said she would that last morning in Seattle. "I'm easy," Sullivan said. "I didn't really make it hard. You found me." Shelly laughed at that, but Sullivan was not sure how she meant it.

It was only later when they were more settled with each other that Sullivan began to lie. And that lying still puzzles him, especially in the hours before dawn. Maybe that is why he shot her picture, but he can't remember for sure. He would make up women for her, fancy descriptions of them and what they did to his feelings. "Well, you know, this Juanita, maybe it was just her name; she was like a rose blooming in the desert."

Shelly asked: "Did I ever make you feel that way?"

Sullivan's answers changed as Shelly changed. In the hospital, Sullivan told her she was a whole forest of blooming desert flowers and Juanita had only been a single rose. Later in Mexico he mentioned that roses have thorns. But when they moved to Montana and Shelly asked again about this Juanita, Sullivan confessed Shelly had always been the rose: Juanita made him feel there was sand slipping through his veins.

Sullivan often wonders where those envelopes went, how they managed to disappear from his life. Sometimes he suspects Shelly took them and imagines her burning them, one by one, the white paper curling black in the yellow flame. But it could have been his father, Old Ernie. Sullivan suspects Ernie never liked Shelly and might have thrown those envelopes away because he thought it was the right thing to do. Sullivan himself might have destroyed them on one of those nights he does not remember but which have become stories people tell sitting around the bar. Of course, it would have been silly to keep them but some part of Sullivan is more sentimental than he would like to believe.

He cannot guess how many envelopes were sent, stuffed only with the newspaper clipping of the accident. The first one was handed to him in a bar

in Lolo by a logger, Taylor Sullivan, who worked out of Darby.

"You know," Taylor said as he sat down next to Sullivan, "I'm glad I run into you. Been looking for you for a couple of days."

The bartender set up their drinks while Sullivan tried to understand why Taylor would be looking for him. Sullivan had never done any logging. His line of work had been in shipyards in Seattle, or ranching, running cattle for his father. Not cutting down trees.

Reaching into his breast pocket, Taylor handed Sullivan a folded envelope. It was addressed to T. Sullivan, the box number in Darby, the envelope typed and postmarked Seattle. Inside was a newspaper clipping, no note. Sullivan can still see those envelopes, the typing and the postmark, but he can no longer remember the details of the clipping. Something about a truck and a Chevy Impala. He remembers how the words 'Mr. and Mrs. Paul Newhouse' looked in newsprint. He knows the bike as a Ducati 500 and it dragged Shelly across an embankment almost one hundred feet.

Taylor sipped his beer, eyeing Sullivan as he read through the article. "I thought it might be for you," Taylor said. "You spending so much time in Seattle."

Sullivan wondered if there were tears in his eye. All he could hear was blood rushing through his ears, the pounding of his heart as he tried to understand what this meant. Who had sent this? Was Shelly dead? How could the story of a motorcycle accident in Seattle have reached Taylor Sullivan in Darby, Montana?

Taylor put a silver dollar on the bar and signalled the bartender to give Sullivan another drink. "You might as well keep it," Taylor said as he set his beer mug down and got up to leave. "It means nothing to me."

That night at the ranch his father said: "There was a call for you from Janie Sullivan up in Missoula. She said she might have a message for you if you knew some people named Newhouse in Seattle." And the next day his father, Ernest Sullivan, received an envelope, postmarked Seattle with the clipping inside. Sullivan made some phone calls. Mrs. Shelly Newhouse was in serious condition in Angel Memorial Hospital in Seattle.

Always checking with the nurses to see if Shelly had visitors, Sullivan would wait if Paul was in her room. The waiting was based on fear of what he might do to Paul if he actually had to meet him again. Sitting with a magazine, Sullivan would watch Paul walk away from Shelly's room. Paul couldn't walk consistently. Sometimes the walk was tight-assed, mincing from the knees and stiff like a horse on ice. Other times he moved away down the hall with a long-legged stride. But sometimes the walk was all in Paul's shoulders, hunched over as if to protect himself. Sullivan studied Paul's walk, one leg in front of the other. Paul could run if he wanted to. Paul could dance.

"You should say something to him," Shelly told him one day. "It would make him feel better."

"Him? Feel better?" Sullivan began to pace the small room. "I'm liable to tear his legs off." He imagined snapping Paul's leg at the knee like a chicken

bone.

Shelly began to sing softly; it was a joke with them.

"I know I'm only Shelly's winter love.
She only wants to see me now and then.
I know I'm only Shelly's winter love.
But she's mine alone 'til springtime comes again."

Sullivan sighed and sat beside her on the bed, on her good side where the leg remained. "How does he know I'm here?"

"You don't give him much credit, do you?"

"I'm liable to give him a couple of busted knees."

"Hush," Shelly said and she put her arms around his neck and let her fingertips wander under his collar and across his shoulders. "He sent you the letter. And he knew you were here when the flowers started coming."

Sullivan looked past her and around the room. The seven sprays of roses, each different and carefully chosen each morning, were all his.

"Paul doesn't notice flowers," Shelly said. "He thought the hospital supplied them. But when he realized they were all roses he knew it was you."

"He never even sent you flowers?"

Shelly smiled.

For the first time since talking to Taylor over a week ago, Sullivan understood the envelopes. What could Paul, or Shelly for that matter, have known about him? When he left Seattle a year ago he told Shelly he was going to Portland. That was all she knew, that and the fact his father owned a ranch in the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. Paul must have tried every Sullivan in the whole valley, every Sullivan in Portland, sending out the clippings, no message, in the hope one of them would reach him or someone he knew. Sullivan imagined Paul's panic. He wondered what Paul would have done if Sullivan had been his first name.

Shelly pulled him to her chest as his tears spilled down his face, making shadowy trails through the fine hairs on her neck. He did not know why he was crying as he lay in Shelly's arms, in her hospital room filled with his flowers. Maybe he was crying for Shelly, or maybe for himself. Maybe he was crying because Paul brought him here, Paul who lost control of his bike and maimed his wife. They would never dance again. Shelly's hands stroked through his hair, her arms wrapped around his back as he cried and breathed in the stale hospital smell, the bitterness of medicine.

There are nights when Sullivan wants company as he sits in the closed bar, his back to the mirrors sipping Chivas and staring into the past. One night Rita sat with him as if she had forgotten to go home. "You know," Sullivan had said, "if you are lucky you only fall in love once. It's sad never to fall in love at all. But if you do it too often the thrill wears off."

"Trash," Rita said. "You take what you can get. There's monuments to the dead all over the world and they don't keep no one warm at night." She

lectured Sullivan about how he was wasting himself over a dead woman. She told him he should kill Shelly in his heart and get on with his life. And then she began to cry over Anthony and how he left her. By the time the sparrows started singing in the trees along the alley both of them were angry and upset. Sullivan took her to his apartment above the bar and held her like a child as she cried herself to sleep. The fullness of her body and the straight blackness of her hair frightened him as they lay in the bed where Shelly died. "Don't cry," he said, "don't cry," as if that chant would soothe them.

In the morning Rita laughed. "It's the booze," she said. "Makes me silly as you are." They smiled, and then kissed, before Rita went downstairs to work.

Maybe some summer night Sullivan will ask Rita to sit with him again, some night when the company of a woman would be nice. Some night when the woman wouldn't lecture and could drink with him in silence following her own silent memories and not tampering with his.

Lying on the Mexican beach with the incoming tide curling only a yard or so from their feet Sullivan played with the coppery strands of Shelly's hair. She was propped on her elbows and her foot traced small circles in the sand. "I don't really miss Paul," she said. "But I feel guilty somehow, as if it were my fault." She laughed and Sullivan remembers that laugh specifically, as if it were an original sound. "My fault," she said again.

"Will you go back to him?" Sullivan was afraid to touch anything more personal than her hair and worked it through his fingers, kneading it against the base of his thumb. Her hair felt the way silk must before it is woven into cloth.

"I don't think he wants me back." She studied the sand at the edge of their blanket. "But I guess he didn't want it to end this way."

Sullivan laughed, the sound catching in his throat. Even if Shelly would wear the artificial leg, it would never be the same. Paul let them live together now. They travelled down to Texas to look for Whooping Cranes, to this beach at Puerto Vallarta, picking up money orders for Shelly, from Paul, in cities all across the continent.

"He wasn't a bad fellow," Shelly said. "I mean the marriage wasn't bad. Look at what he let us get away with." She turned her head to smile at him and her hair slipped out of his fingers. Her smile faded as she watched his face. "The accident was just an accident. It could have happened to you and me."

"No," Sullivan said. "It couldn't have happened to us. I wouldn't have let it."

She reached over and traced his nose, ran her fingertips through his eyebrows. "Just pretend it didn't happen."

Sullivan rolled away from her over to the edge of the blanket. "It's just done. That's all."

"Listen," she said, wriggling her body over until it touched his again, leaving that shadowy space where her right leg had been. "I have a plan." She

winked.

Sullivan pressed his eyes shut against the sun. "There are some plans I don't want to know about."

"You don't want to hear my plan?"

Opening his eyes, Sullivan watched the flight of a gull wheeling above the waves. The sun hurt his eyes, made them tear. At last he said: "If you are going back to Paul, I don't want to know until the day you are ready to leave. I want you to wake up in the morning and say: 'This is it. I'm going today.' Nothing more than that. I'll get you all set up. Train. Plane. But I don't want to count off the days. Only prisoners count days. I don't want to think of myself that way."

"I'm going to tell you my plan."

Sullivan clasped his hands around his neck and stretched himself out full length in the sand. He closed his eyes against the sun. "Shoot," he said.

"I'm going to open a dance hall."

Sullivan shifted his shoulders deeper into the sand. "A dance hall. How are you going to do that?"

"I'll get the money from Paul. He would love to give me money. It would make him feel better."

"How much does he think that leg of yours was worth?"

"I think he'll let me set the price. He can afford it."

"I think that accident scrambled your brains." Sullivan looked at her, the hearts of her eyes bright with secrets and pleasures, a slight smile set into her lips.

"Don't you like dance halls?" she asked. "Well, do you?"

"I've been a sailor and a rancher. Those types, dance halls just gives them a place to fight on Saturday night."

"Good. Maybe they need a dance hall in Montana"

He understood, but slowly, the idea seeping through his mind like sleep, calming and drowsy. The beginning of a good dream. "Montana," he said. "You and me?"

She smiled, broadly now, her teeth strong against the softness of her face. She kissed him, her tongue sliding inside his mouth. Wrapping his arms around her he settled her onto his chest, the sand scratching at his skin.

They lay on the sand under the sun and Sullivan listened to the details of her plan, the problems she had already thought of, the ideas she had for the type of bar she would own. "Just the thing for a one-legged woman," she said. "Be my own boss. Have people around. And if you are nice to me I'll give you free drinks." She wanted a good day bar with some steady regulars, a dance band in the evenings.

"You sure you don't want to go back to Seattle?" Sullivan asked.

"I've never been to Montana. Cowboys. And Indians."

Sullivan now knows Shelly was never surprised. In all those years it was Sullivan who experienced the surprises. Watching his own silent movies Sullivan sees her crutches propped against a bar stool while her body slides

around the pool table, but he does not know where she learned to shoot such good pool. He doesn't know why the sounds of crickets made her nervous or why she said she was afraid of eggs. Some nights he can remember the tunes to old songs she used to sing to him in bed. "Would You Like to Swing on a Star" was her favorite and she knew all the words to all the verses. Fish, pig, cow.

He wonders where Paul is, why they never got divorced. He is afraid Paul will show up some day and claim this bar as his own. If that day comes it will be another surprise because Sullivan does not know what he will do.

The bar Shelly wanted was a little rambling grocery store with a GOING OUT OF BUSINESS sign pasted on the front. It was in a quiet neighborhood, trees along the alley. With the shelving taken out there would be plenty of room for a dance floor, the meat locker would make a perfect cooler for beer, ice, and wine. Built into the side of the place was a rundown laundromat and above the store was a small apartment. There were a couple of storage rooms along one wall.

"Those big chain stores, that's what's driven us out," the man said. "Me and the wife, we're going down to New Mexico. Going to retire in the sun."

"Great place, New Mexico," Shelly said. "How much?"

The man looked puzzled and seemed to grow physically smaller in front of Sullivan's eyes. He played with the buttons on his cash register.

"You know," he said, "it's so hard to decide these things. I've had the building and stock all appraised. All that. But when I think of those numbers it's like that's all my life was worth. We started this store twenty-five years ago, just at the end of the Depression."

It was Paul who bought the building, cash outright in the form of a check to Shelly. No payments, just flat cash, a sum of money Sullivan could not imagine. Some nights as he lay beside Shelly in bed he imagined the money as bills, fifty dollar bills, one hundred dollar bills, physical money he could hold in his hand. But as he counted those imaginary bills Sullivan would drift off to sleep and the amount would still not be reached.

With the sale of the stock and fixtures Shelly turned the store into her bar. She loved the salvage trips the most, long drives to dying Montana towns where even the bars were going out of business. They found the oak bar in Drummond, a Bar and Grill neon sign in a dump outside Arlee. The back bar with the beveled mirrors came from a hotel in Anaconda.

Sullivan has a whole album of mental postcards, memories of Shelly, sometimes the whisper of sounds, that he can stare at for long periods of time. He can see her working the hand sander, polishing the water marks and cigarette burns out of the twenty foot oaken bar. He sees the even, careful strokes of her brush as she applied the new coat of varnish. He sees her standing on the space for the new dance floor, her hip thrust against one crutch, as she tried to explain to the workmen why she thought the dance floor should be laid diagonal to the square of the building. He sees her propped against the back

bar polishing the bevelled mirrors and how she sat on the floor, sawdust littering her skirt, as she tacked together the little liquor shelves, measuring and sanding each edge so they would fit perfectly.

And Sullivan remembers how it was at first, the workmen drinking in the unfinished bar, women stopping by for a drink as they did their laundry next door. There was always painting, cleaning, rearranging that Shelly would direct from her wheeled stool behind the bar, sometimes grabbing her crutches to walk out to inspect some new paint or to supervise the installation of the jukebox. They had steady customers before the sign ever went up: Shelly's Leg, specially done in neon blue with a high heeled shoe kicking up and down above the door. Later they added the Bar and Grill, although there never was a grill, and finally a salvaged Motel sign. They had argued about the Motel sign; the three little storage rooms were not much of a motel. But the sign seemed to find a place of its own above the faded paint of the Laundromat.

It was mostly women who drank in Shelly's bar. As their clothes washed and dried next door, or while they helped Shelly put the finishing touches on the place, Sullivan served them drinks. He can remember their drinks and their faces, but not many of their names. Shelly and Rita would sometimes play chess. Some afternoons four or five women would take a table out by the dance floor and play Monopoly or cards. "Hey Sullivan," they would shout, "this place out of wine?"

Sullivan watched them, the women drinking and playing games in the afternoons, the men who stopped by after work to watch the women. When the band started playing Shelly would sit with him behind the bar, serving drinks and watching the dancing, close together until two.

In the three years since Shelly's death Sullivan has found only Birdheart and sometimes Amos can sit with him and share scotch and silence. Birdheart is best because sometimes Amos gets drunk and cries. Once or twice a year, as if telling some shameful secret that has never been shared before, Amos will talk about the day he came back from a long rolling drunk through the little bars strung out across the Nevada desert and found a moving van at his house, his first wife's car packed, and his children tearing handfuls of grass out of the lawn because they did not believe there would be grass in the city. It might be a week or ten days before Amos will come back and Randa will have called every day or have stopped in to look for him. When he finally returns Amos will claim he had been out of town, although Sullivan knows Amos has been drinking at the Hotel Palace, his beaten up Ford parked in the alley with the dumpsters.

Birdheart is best because he watches his own silent movies as the night turns to morning and they share scotch. Sullivan counts the till while Birdheart wipes tables, empties ashtrays, and cleans the coffeepot. Some nights Sullivan will offer Birdheart his Chivas and if he takes it Birdheart will ease himself onto the back bar, propping his long legs against the shelves beneath the counter. An arm's length away Sullivan sits on the wheeled stool and they pass

the bottle back and forth slowly without speaking or looking at each other. These are the nights when Sullivan feels the wind in his ears and the ache of loss in his bones. He does not believe he will die of a broken heart but believes the only thing that could ease his pain would be a pair of woman's hands rubbing small circles around his shoulder blades. He does not seek women on these nights but offers Birdheart his Chivas and feels stronger, or safer, with another man sitting beside him, staring into the darkness.